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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR EXPRESSES CONCERN ABOUT VIETNAM'S DRAFT PRESS
LAW

REF: HANOI 0569

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11. (SBU) Summary: The Ambassador met with Minister of Information & Communications (MIC) Le Duan Hop on November 6, 2008. The Ambassador expressed concern about the Government of Vietnam's (GVN) draft press law, urged that private sector companies in Vietnam participate in the upcoming 2008 ICT Commercial Dialogue Working Group Meeting, and asked MIC to circulate a copy of its draft telecom law. Minister Hop outlined his priorities, which include Information and Communication Technology (ICT) education, and universal access and e-government. Hop also asked the Ambassador to help Vietnam in its bid to establish a University of Information & Communications. End Summary.

12. (SBU) The Ambassador met with Le Duan Hop, Minister of Information & Communications (MIC) on November 6. MIC was formed in 2007 after a merger between the Ministries of Culture & Information and Post & Telematics. Hop, appointed Culture & Information Minister in 2006, has a PhD in Economics and is a member of the Communist Party Central Committee.

Concern About New Press Law

13. (SBU) The Ambassador expressed concern about Vietnam's new press law, which MIC is currently drafting. The Ambassador said the new law, if passed in its current form, would tighten journalistic freedoms, exert overly broad political demands on journalists and editors, compel restructuring of media organizations, and place new censorship restrictions on press conferences and electronic media. The Ambassador offered to work with the Ministry to provide technical assistance to strengthen press freedom and reduce corruption, but Hop did not reply. Note: The Embassy plans to follow-up by sending the Ministry an offer of assistance in a letter.

14. (SBU) Hop defended the new press law by citing what he said were several "inaccuracies" in Vietnamese press stories about the 2006 PMU-18 case. PMU-18, named after a unit of the GVN's Ministry of Transport, was a corruption scandal involving officials who stole development funds earmarked for roads and bridges, gambling much of it on European football games (Reftel). In May 2008, police arrested two high-profile Vietnamese newspaper reporters and charged them with "abuse of power" for their reporting. A court subsequently convicted both reporters of "violating democratic freedom rights," sentencing one to prison. Hop told the Ambassador that the reporters deliberately tried to exaggerate the wealth of a high-ranking Transport official accused of wrongdoing in the case.

¶15. (SBU) Hop said MIC is finalizing the draft law and hoped to send it to the National Assembly for approval in May 2009. He said that while some view the new law as complicated and restrictive, the Ministry aims to create a "comprehensive and transparent" legal regime for the press. The Ambassador asked Hop to support the efforts of foreign news organizations to open offices in HCMC, which the GVN currently does not permit.

Private Sector Participation in ICT Commercial Dialogue

¶16. (SBU) Turning to the upcoming ICT Commercial Dialogue, the Ambassador thanked the Minister for sending a 20-member interagency delegation to Washington and encouraged Vietnam to send private sector representatives as well. Currently, no Vietnamese companies are scheduled to attend the Dialogue. (Note: Following the meeting, the Ministry reported that Madame Quan Duy Ngan Ha, MIC's ICT Dialogue Working Group leader, would not attend the Dialogue Working Group Meeting. Instead, Bui Nhu Uyen, the Ministry's lead official on ICT education, will lead the delegation. End note.) The Ambassador noted that MIC has proposed universal access, e-government and ICT education as topics for the Dialogue's Working Group, and he asked the Minister to elaborate on Vietnam's plan to develop these capabilities.

¶17. (SBU) Hop responded energetically by outlining the GVN's desire to collaborate with a U.S. university to develop an Information & Communications University in Vietnam. The Ambassador welcomed the idea and asked the Ministry to provide a paper with additional details in time for the Joint Education Task Force Conference in HCM City in January 2009.

Vietnam's E-Government Ambitions

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¶18. (SBU) Hop admitted that the rollout of e-government services, which the GVN has been discussing for several years, was proceeding "very slowly." He agreed with the Ambassador that Vietnam would likely require a new agency to coordinate technology standards among the various ministries. Hop said e-government was "critical" to ensure that Vietnam's central government could communicate with its citizens, provincial government and the business community. "We can only solve corruption and other shortcomings by deploying government services online," he said.

¶19. (SBU) Note: The World Bank agreed in 2006 to lend Vietnam \$88 million toward a \$197 million ICT Development Project. The project, signed by then-State Bank governor Le Duc Thuy, aimed to modernize Vietnam's ICT infrastructure and enhance e-government services. The World Bank has warned Vietnam that it will withdraw the funding by December 1, 2008 if the GVN fails to hire consultants to analyze its ICT status. End note.

¶10. (SBU) MIC is working to increase telecom and broadband coverage in rural areas and Hop said Vietnam hoped to learn from the experience of the United States in achieving this goal. (Note: In a 2005 ICT strategy paper, the GVN outlined a goal to reach internet subscription rates of 8-12 per 100 people, of which 30 percent would be broadband subscriptions. End note). Hop also stressed that it was imperative for Vietnam's managers and business professionals to receive ICT training. In closing, the Ambassador urged the Minister to circulate a draft of Vietnam's long-awaited new telecom law (now dubbed the "Communications Law") and expressed hope that MIC would adhere to its latest timeline to issue four 3G licenses by January 2009. U.S. companies Qualcomm and Motorola believe that 3G services will help to expand mobile voice and high-speed broadband data services to Vietnamese in urban and rural areas.

MICHALAK